

Collapsing Authority in the Arab World: Threat or Opportunity?

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Abstract

Virtual social networks have brought down dictators. But they cannot rebuild legitimate authority as readily as they destroy autocracy. After an initial euphoria of freedom, the path before North Africa and the Middle East will pass through a window of vulnerability when Islamists can seize power and derail transition to democracy. Continuing collapse of authority in the world's energy jugular and the risk of a refugee tsunami toward Europe are serious threats to open societies in advanced democracies. They warrant a massive effort to transfer democratic skills and help reconstruct the region's broken polities. It will soon be too late.

Biography

Shahriar Ahy has broad experience in political development, from Eastern Europe to the Islamic World. He was a director of the US-Baltic Foundation, which supported civil society and democratic public administration in the Baltic States. He was a co-founder of Baltic Fund, the first private equity investment Fund in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He was also the chief executive of AGI, which controlled media assets ranging from news wire in the US to radio and television networks, as well as production, programming, media sales and cable operations in the Middle East. Shahriar was the principal of the General Implicator, a project to create a natural language comprehension engine usable on Arpanet, the forerunner of Internet. He received a high pass on his doctoral exams at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1976 and passed his doctoral thesis colloquium in 1978, based on a model to analyze the behaviour of oil exporting countries. At MIT he was assistant to Ithiel de Sola Pool who edited the handbook of communication, a compendium of theories of communication.

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The last teenage year corresponds to an interesting number. Nineteen years before September 11th 2001, the Saudi education system came under the direction of religious Shaikhs. This significant concession to clerics took place shortly after fanatic Islamists had forcibly taken over the Holy Mosque in Mecca and the region was absorbing the waves of Khomeini's revolution. Nineteen is also the number of perpetrators of 9/11. More than three quarter of them had undergone an education informed by the "curriculum of the religious Shaikhs". Information has consequences.

From across the waters to the south of Spain, to the waters to the west of India, the current wave of freedom movements comes nineteen years after the launch of the first pan-Arab satellite TV. From above the wall of government censors, satellite TV brought images of the good life in the free world to ordinary Arab homes. One cannot overestimate the impact of those images on this generation.

Nineteen years ago was also the year Internet became commercially available. The Internet generation learned how to assemble in the virtual space and discuss public issues. Now they could demand the good life together, not just dream about it alone. Authoritarian regimes

found it increasingly difficult to keep people isolated, a key to maintenance of unanswerable power.

Non-ideological autocrats' typical response is mostly denial of access, blackouts, cut or reduced-capacity communication lines, as well as detention and incarceration of bloggers and net activists. As their main base of power, their security forces typically do not have the imagination to do much more. Totalitarians are different, however. They enter the virtual space and compete, although not on equal grounds. Their ideological cadres relish a contest of ideas, rigged by preferential access to media. But will they win?

Unlike classical forms of political power in the physical world that take years to accumulate, power to mobilize protest in the virtual space has proven capable of growing from hundreds to hundreds of thousands of participants in a few weeks. Despite the autocrats' restrictions and onslaughts the information from satellite TV and through Internet has already played a major role in bringing down dictators. That demonstrates the power of media to bring down authority. And the process does not stop at the presidential palaces: Those who brought down dictators will not go home happy with the same pay, same boss, same working conditions, or lack thereof. So they will keep tearing authority all the way down to where ordinary people live and work.

The key question is whether the new information society can build democratic authority as readily as it can destroy autocracy. Because without authority, work cannot be organized, the economy deteriorates, society declines and the capital of hope formed by initial success dissipates in a vicious cycle of loss of faith in democracy. This is when the ideal moment for Islamists arrives. Before the departure of secular autocrats they were not given a chance. After democracy matures and bears the fruits of tolerance and pluralism Islamists have little appeal. In the twain, however, there is a period of vulnerability. Collapse of authority and economic decline create a need for certainty which their ideology is glad to provide.

Managing this transitional vulnerability is of vital interest to the free world, if only because the vast region currently in turmoil includes its energy jugular. Europe has the additional interest of defending against a potential tsunami of refugees should authority collapse across the waters to its south. Failure could mean resurgence of Islamism in Europe through immigration, nationalist reaction and even resurrection of borders within. This would jeopardize the dream of a liberal, secular and united Europe.

America's eternal faith in triumph of democracy tends to underestimate this vulnerability. From Thomas Jefferson in France to George Bush in Iraq, American leaders have had a belief that mass-participation or elections will inevitably lead to democracy. But Putin and Chirac begged to differ on Iraq. The former remembered that the Bolshevik Revolution followed the Menshevik and the latter recalled the Reign of Terror that killed the positive hopes of the French Revolution, followed by militarism and decades of instability and war that lost more than ten million European lives.

So which will it be in North Africa and the Middle East? Will liberal democracy triumph, or will the better organized and ideologically committed Islamists fill the vacuum of authority?

Even if only the milder Ukraine or Belarus pattern of downward cycles of loss of hope in democracy sets in, there will be many who will regret the social network frenzy and uncontrolled multiplication of participation. One cannot blame poor Egyptians in Giza, who have lost their livelihood due to a collapse of tourism, in scolding the social networkers on

Al-Tahrir. Not everyone is willing to pay the price France paid for democracy for a hundred years after the Revolution when its national prosperity did not augment itself as much as the twenty years before.

The bad news is that societies in North Africa and the Middle East were not brought up on the lessons of Greek democracy, Roman law and rational administration, or emulation of Christ who willingly gave the right of secular rule to Caesar. Their unitary view of the divine and the earthly, their holistic view of community and administration tend to look favourably to the fundamentalists' presence in neighbourhoods offering a personal relationship that covers everything from faith to welfare, from schools to hospitals. In contrast, liberal democracy's equality before secular laws is inherently impersonal, while functionaries remote-controlled by those laws feel cold and distant. The alienation resulting from the impersonal relation between bureaucrats and citizens leads to corruption, reducing trust even further. Thus liberal democracy has an uphill battle against Islamists in North Africa and the Middle East.

The good news is that many Western institutions devoted to building democracy have accumulated a vast body of experience and scored impressive successes outside the Western world, from South America to Indonesia and, especially in Eastern Europe. They have learned the importance of building democracy from the ground up. They understand it is not just the big vessels of democracy, like national elections, but the small capillaries of the political corpus, where the daily experience of ordinary citizens with government takes place, that count in nurturing trust in government.

In conclusion, we may be at an inflection point when the emphasis and focus of free flow of information should change, from high politics to low, from mobilizing Azadi and Al-Tahrir squares to building civil society, from inflating demand for democracy to enabling supply of democracy. This may require software layers on top of social networks devoted to interest aggregation and community building. It will benefit from mass media content demonstrating examples of constructive engagement of public servants with communities. And it will benefit from transparent connectivity of e-government with daily concerns of ordinary citizens.

European institutions that helped the reconstruction of Eastern Europe have a particular role in helping with transfer of technology and skills of keeping the capillaries of information open. They can help with media conduits and content that would increase public awareness and vigilance in defence of free flow of information. Democracy and free flow of information may mean different things but they are co-extensive: On the long run, the former cannot survive without the latter and the latter is enough to ensure the former. To use Popper's words, let us hope the friends of the open society will defeat their enemies during the transitional vulnerability on the road to lasting democracy.